

Protéger L'Église (Protect the Church)

To my fellow delegates, and all who may be in attendance today, I request you think logically about the consequences of these egregious attacks on the Catholic Church for France and its people. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the Obligatory Oath are an attack on religious rights for all Catholic followers. The Decrees on the Church lands are an obvious violation of the fundamental right to property and give way to absolute power for the government. These policies will not help France, they will only strip France of its morals and the church of its ability to provide charity to those in need. It is in our best interest to repeal the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, rescind the Decrees on Church Lands, and revoke the Obligatory Oath.

People claim that these policies will strengthen the French economy and are necessary to lessen the power of the Church over the government, but they are really just poorly concealed attacks on Catholicism. First, let us address the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the similar Obligatory Oath. As Edmund Burke said in reference to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, “it seems to me, that this new ecclesiastical establishment is intended only to be temporary, and preparatory to the utter abolition, under any of its forms, of the Christian religion, whenever the minds of men are prepared for this last stroke against it, by the accomplishment of the plan for bringing its ministers into universal contempt” (Burke, pg. 125). This attack is not for a love of France, but rather a hatred of the Church.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy is so heinous that it has already received condemnation from the Pope Pius VI, and with merit. The Pope and Catholic Church attempted to negotiate with the National Assembly when they first learned of the possibility of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, generously giving “orders that the collection of taxes from French revenues should be discontinued, although these taxes were due for Our services from unbroken custom and earlier agreements” (Pope Pius VI, 1791). The National Assembly denied this offer, proving that the issues at hand were not just financial and that the Assembly had little care or respect for the Church and its followers. The Assembly made no move to compromise, and the Church could not accept the “articles since they were at variance with canonical regulations” (Pope Pius VI, 1791). After being blatantly ignored, the Church had no choice but to take action, announcing France to be in schism with the Church (Pope Pius VI, 1791).

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy has not even been effective, and likely never will be. A majority of bishops have refused to take the oath, with some archbishops going so far as to directly ask the Pope for help (Pope Pius VI, 1791). The bishops are in an impossible position, essentially being told they must give complete loyalty either to the country they live in, or the church they have devoted themselves to. The Catholic Church regards “any bishops appointed in accordance with its decrees as schismatic and lacking all ecclesiastical jurisdiction” (Pope Pius VI, 1791). The Civil Constitution of the Clergy orders that “no church or parish of France nor any French citizen may acknowledge upon any occasion, or upon any pretext whatsoever the authority of an ordinary bishop or of an archbishop whose see shall be under the supremacy of a foreign power” (Popiel et al., pg. 129). Priests are being told they must put their country over

their God (Popiel et al., pg. 37). All bishops and officials who serve the church have been unwillingly placed in a dilemma that has no true solution, and never will.

All parishioners are additionally gravely harmed by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, also being placed in an impossible dilemma. If they are to ignore the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, they are directly disobeying the law of the land. However, to worship with and confess to a bishop who has taken the oath is near worthless, as the bishop is a man with no spiritual authority. Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on to his disciples, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:22-23). His disciples were granted the powers of the Holy Spirit so that God may forgive sins through them, and so became the Sacrament of Penance. “Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church,” and “the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament” (Pope John Paul ii, 357). The Obligatory Oath and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy take away the power of forgiveness held by priests and bishops, and in doing so, denies the possibility of forgiveness and salvation from Christ and entry to Heaven to any parishioners who hope to confess their mortal sins. This is a clear violation of basic human rights regarding religious freedom for all French Catholics.

The second issue that is of immediate concern is the Decrees on Church Land, which steals the property of the Church. Near all Enlightenment thinkers have agreed on the fact that estate is an inalienable human right, and we ourselves said: “property is an inviolable and sacred human right” (Popiel et al., pg. 123). Even Rosseau, perhaps the most influential philosopher for radicals of the Revolution, acknowledged this. Rousseau believed “the sacred right of property”

to be the “support” of the state (Rousseau, pg. 153). Not only that, he believed it to be the most important right. “It is certain that the right of property is the most sacred of all the rights of citizenship, and even more important in some respects than liberty itself” (Rousseau, pg. 151). And yet we are so eager to deny this right to the Church. I understand the arguments that may be presented in defense of the Decrees, but I wish to counter them.

Firstly, I am aware many people, specifically, the Jacobins, view the bodies of the Church as “fictitious persons, creatures of the state” (Burke, pg. 90) to whom rights need not be afforded. However, the church is not some figurative entity, but an institution comprised of many people, and every monastery, church, and any other clerical body whom you steal from consists of men who are being denied of the rights we agreed on (Popiel et al., pg. 34). How can this assembly advocate for the rights of the people, and then deny them to the followers of a specific religion?

Secondly, I recognize that when speaking of the rights regarding property, we went on to say “no one shall be deprived thereof except where public necessity, legally determined, shall clearly demand it,” (Popiel et al., pg. 125) and it is easy to feel as though with the current state of our economy, taking the land of the Church is necessary. However, I argue that this policy is actually more detrimental to our economy, as many problems arise for which we have no solution. For example, once all of the lands have been sold, how do we plan to pay the salaries of the priests, who will now be employed by the state (Popiel et al., pg. 35)? These Decrees are a wildly inefficient means of income for the state and do no more than preventing the Church from providing the charity it has for so long given to the poorest citizens of France (Popiel et al., pg. 35). In addition, the people benefiting the most from these Decrees are the rich, including some men in this assembly, as our system of assignats will create great profit for all buyers of Church

land (Popiel et al., pg. 160). Just as with the laws the Revolution claims to be fighting against, the rich are reaping the benefits, while the poor are left to suffer.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the Obligatory Oath, and the Decrees on Church Lands are direct attacks on the Catholic Church. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the Obligatory Oath ignore the needs and rights of all French Catholics and has made an enemy out of the Pope. The Decrees on Church Lands only creates more problems and denies Catholics of the rights of property. I beg of all to consider the needs of Catholics and rescind these awful policies.

Works cited

Pope John Paul ii, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.

Popiel, Jennifer J., et al. *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2015.

Burke, Edmund and Frank M. Turner (Ed.). *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. London (US): Yale University Press, 2008.

Pope Pius VI, *Charitas: In the Civil Oath in France*. 1791

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and G. D. H. Cole. *The Social Contract and the Discourses*. Everyman's Library, 1993.